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Women's burdens: exploratory analysis on matrifocality, (re)production and social protection in Douro region, Portugal

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Abstract

Drawing from the concepts of matrifocality, kinship and gender inequality, this paper develops a brief discussion around the overloading of duties faced by socially and economically vulnerable women. The accumulation of such duties burdens women with social and parental responsibilities, reinforcing their role as income providers, household custodians and primary caretakers of dependent children and elders. These duties, often culturally and socially informed, are especially overwhelming for women belonging to less affluent social strata. Manifestly exploratory, the analysis is based on three case studies of women, all of them in their fifties, living in the Douro vineyards region. They all assume the headship of their households and benefit or were beneficiaries of the Social Insertion Income (SII), a state social protection device intended to alleviate economic hardships and promote active labor insertion.

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1. Introduction

Women's emancipation surged throughout the second half of the 20th century, stemming from the northern European countries and later reaching the Mediterranean nations (Ferreira, 1999; Torres, 2003; Alberdi, 2003; Sarogni, 2004; Thistle, 2006). At first, this trend allowed women to achieve higher levels of economic independence and personal fulfillment through the accomplishment of professional autonomy, but, at the same time and in some circumstances, women end up overburdened by their professional and domestic responsibilities (Perista, 2002). Amassing the functions of household providers and family caretakers becomes particularly demanding to women who

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belong to less favored social strata and is especially burdensome to those integrating matrifocal families. In these cases, the mother and her matrilineal kin turn out to be the backbone of household cohesion, taking in their hands decision-making and family strategies (Vasconcelos, 2002).

In the following pages we aim to discuss how social protection policies can act as an aggravator of gender inequality by further overloading women with family responsibilities. The analysis draws from an ongoing ethnographic investigation forming part of the research project "The labor inclusion of women in collectives at risk of social exclusion" (Exp. 147/12 MSSSI, coordinated by Oscar Fernández Alvarez, University of Léon, and financed by Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad de España). The investigation is centered on the case studies of three 50-, 52- and 59-year-old women using life and family stories as the main instruments of data collection. The biographic methods that underscored this qualitative approach were supported by a series of three open ended and semi-structured interviews with each of the women. The cases present rich empirical evidences of the hardships faced by women of different sociological backgrounds subject to social insertion policies. Common to all the cases was the fact that these women stood as their families' main affective and socio-economic support, and endured or still face unemployment and serious difficulties in accessing the labor market. Besides these aspects, they also bear in common the fact that they benefit or benefited from the Social Insertion Income (SII), a State-run social protection device meant to relieve individuals and families undergoing severe economical difficulties.

Bearing in mind the particular familial configuration and socio-economic circumstances of each case, our analysis revolves around two main axes: (1) to question assumptions that in an acritical manner associate matrifocality to poverty; (2) understand the SII's ambivalence – on one hand, the device contributes to alleviate the economic hardships of these women and their families, and, on the other hand, overloads them with further responsibilities and social prejudice. Providing shelter, food and other forms of care to their offspring as well as elderly relatives is assumed as a "natural" requirement, as part of the condition of "being a woman, a mother and a daughter", as two of the women clearly stated. On top of these self-assumed responsibilities the SII program imposes an extra load of duties as a result of the program's statutory dispositions. Hence, the compulsory attendance of professional training courses or carrying out "active job search" strategies sit among the examples of how the SII may impose further liability on women, weighing especially on those who assure matrifocal and single-parent family structures.

2. Matrifocality, poverty and responsibility

The concept of matrifocality was used for the first time by Smith (1956; 1973) in the context of Caribbean afro-descendent families where mothers occupy a central role in the domestic sphere and the father is either absent or assumes a sporadic and residual participation. The term was then used by a variety of authors dedicated to the study of African-descendent families in the American continent (Landes, 1967; Gonzalez, 1970; Stack, 1974; Woortman, 1987; Clark, 1999). Though it became more evident in the New World communities that received the major African slave influx, matrifocality, as Smith (1956, 1973, 1996) pointed out, is a quite common family configuration in many geographies and societies, particularly within the less affluent social classes where upward mobility is restrained.

According to a wide range of literary sources on the subject, matrifocality should not be seen as a normative trait of kinship systems, instead, it should be understood as the result of a particular conjuncture, and, therefore, may assume multiple configurations. The rising volatility of marital bonds and conjugal relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004) alongside the very same hegemonic gender arrangements that grant male privileges and bestow women's "natural" commitment toward their families helps explain the incidence and maintenance of matrifocality. It is not, as Ypeij (2009) notes, an inevitable feature of socioeconomic destructuring neither a synonym of matrilineal descent, matrilocality or matriarchy.

Matrifocality often coincides with female monoparentality, as we were able to observe in two of the cases below (see fig.1). Both show a breakdown in the conjugal relationship, the physical removal of the husband and his nearly absolute withdrawal from parental relationships and obligations. In these cases, this resulted in the wife (and the mother) assuming a pivotal position around which both households gravitate. In the first case, the household is composed of four compacted generations: the mother, her progenitors, one daughter and two granddaughters. In the second case, two generations cohabit under the same roof: the mother and two adult children (a third daughter, mother of a one-year-old infant, though married and living in her own household, frequently resorts to her mother's material and emotional backup including babysitting). The third case is somewhat different from the others, as it is characterized by the stability of the marital dyad and the continuous presence of the father figure, in spite of the fact

that, due to the husband's substance abuse, the wife has assumed a major role in the household's productive and reproductive processes, as her two adult children and herself fully acknowledged.

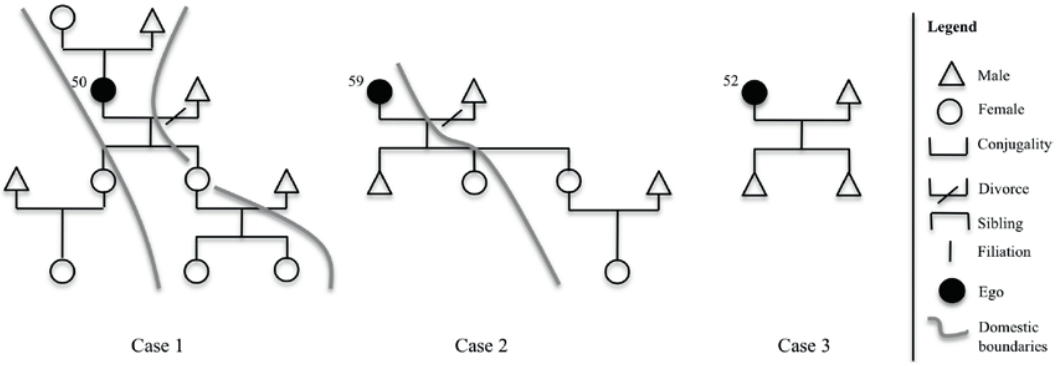

Fig.1. Kinship diagrams of the three women heads of household

In the Douro region, as in many parts of the globe (Lavinas, 1996; Lucas and Hoff, 2008), unemployment, precarious work relations and low incomes have been affecting these women. Under the present-day economic situation, matrifocality contributes to increasing women's duties, placing additional difficulties before them since they need to combine their participation in the productive as well as in reproductive spheres, unlike cases when men assume the head of the household (Macedo, 2008). On top of that, in spite of the much vaunted equal income policy and the immense legislation produced to ensure equivalent salaries among men and women, a wide gender gap persists when it comes to remuneration for one and the other. According to the Portuguese Ministry of Solidarity and Social Security, in 2011, men earned on average 20% more than women (MSSS/GEP, 2012), and, in the Douro region, working in the same occupation could award women with an income 20% lower than the one paid to men (INE, 2013).

The presence of very harsh living conditions constrains the well being of these women and their households; however, sustaining the idea that matrifocal families result exclusively from poverty conditions may act as a reductionist conceptual oversimplification. Instead, the stereotypical formulations that associate these families with the most vulnerable and poor should be questioned and, at the same time, the ideas around the feminization of poverty should be subject to critical analysis (Chant, 2006; 2008; Macedo, 2008; Ypeij, 2009). In the cases studied, especially in two of them, poverty was not the sole and determining factor behind matrifocality. In the Douro region, as in many other contexts, the socio-economic factors that can explain the emergence and maintenance of matrifocality are multiple and its complexity prevents us from elaborating further on the subject – issues like the transformation of intimacy, the emerging of new family configurations, changes in the social organization of the economy or new migration trends are just a few examples of driving factors. On the other hand, and drawing from our case studies, the fact that such women have taken a prominent role in determining their families' fate has not contributed to generating more poverty nor to aggravating their vulnerability, in spite of being overwhelmed with chores and obligations.

We must be aware of the fact that poverty, especially when analyzed under the scope of domestic gender relations, is not restricted to economic or monetary deprivation. It is, in many cases, expressed and influenced by several other features like violence, disempowerment or lack of agency (Ypeij, 2009). As a matter of fact, though the dearth of economic resources may not exist, women may still endure social risk and social vulnerability, for instance, when men exert control over resources, depriving women from participating in the household's financial management or in other decisions concerning the family. On such occasions, as Chant (2006, p. 205) pointed out, "it is understandable how women may opt to 'trade-off' the economic difficulties of female headship in favour of gaining more control over the lives and well-being of themselves and their dependents".

The three cases studied reveal a close relation between matrifocality and female empowerment. Indeed, matrifocality allows women to affirm their self-determination as shown, for instance, in the way they mobilize a panoply of resources to fulfill domestic needs. An agency that can also be seen in the way they gather sources of income among the opportunities presented by the informal economy and in the way they manage to create work

prospects through their social capital networks. However, matrifocality still presents an extra weight to these women's already heavy economic burden and, at the same time, renders their former male companions unaccountable, as one of the interviewees (50 years old) reported: "He [ex-husband] was a scoundrel. He did not want to work. I've tried to make him give something to his children, but he wouldn't keep a steady job nor made any contributions to the Social Security. So, the court couldn't do anything about it [oblige the former husband to pay for alimony]". Another testimony (59-year-old woman) points to the same conclusion: "When we parted our ways, I stood with my three children and my husband never contributed to their well being. […] It was I who had to bring food to the table and feed the four of us. […] Even when the court ordered my husband to give us some money, he never really complied. […] Everything fell on my lap".

According to Chant (2006), instead of talking about the "feminization of poverty" we should refer to the concept of "feminization of responsibility". The general underlying idea is that, more than poverty itself, what ends up being feminized is a set of duties that forces women, especially when fully assuming their families' destinations, to make additional efforts to meet challenges and problems as demanding as those cited below. This is a collection of challenges as diverse as threats to family cohesion and stability presented by husbands and former husbands; the multiplication of duties concerning the maintenance of the domestic space (house-keeping, paying the bills, coordinating construction and refurbishing works, car maintenance, etc.); the need to ensure the nourishment and proper health-care of the household members; and the responsibility of taking care of socially vulnerable relatives. Putting into practice strategies to cope with such difficulties contributes to narrowing the possibilities of achieving a professional career, a hindrance aggravated by their feminine condition. Beyond these constraints, all the women have (or had) to abide to the conditions imposed by the SII program and, consequently, were at risk of suffering from the potentially perverse effects of that social policy device.

3. A social protection device bearing paradoxical effects

Entangled in circumstances of severe economic need, two of the three women, at the time of the study (2013-2014), were beneficiaries of the SII program and the third woman benefited from it from 1996 until 2009. The SII is a State-run social policy device based on conditional cash transfer (CCT) protocols. The program conforms to some Keynesian principles, especially the idea of devising a "safety net" devoted to tackle social and material vulnerability and, simultaneously, intends to stimulate proactive labor insertion and citizenship (Hespanha, 2008; Dornelles, 2009; Rodrigues, 2010; Cardim, Mota and Pereira, 2011). The SII brings a monthly financial stipend that can range up to 178.15 euro for the holder, 89.07 euro for each adult family member living in the household and 53.44 euro for each under-age dependent (ISS, 2013). Becoming a SII beneficiary involves complying with a series of conditions, mostly incumbent on the main holder – the one that contracts the program – usually, a woman. The holder, thus, needs to meet the terms set out in the *insertion contract,* meaning among other things, a commitment toward the education and health of their under-age offspring. The deal, as we can see, may extend the holder's responsibilities over others. Namely targeted at the unemployed, the insertion contract represents an agreement between the beneficiary and the State where the former commits to engage in an active job search and to attend professional training programs.

In Portugal, as in many other countries with CCT policies, the majority of the SII applicants are women. In 2013, 185.232 out of 360.372 were female beneficiaries; 3.852 as opposed to 3.694 male beneficiaries in the Douro region (PORDATA, 2014). As stated above, in the same household there can only be one adult receiving the maximum stipend of 178.15 euro (holder) and the one that receives it is usually the one who takes care of the application process – a woman. In this sense, women tend to assume the forefront of the SII request, representing their family before the social services.

Such a prevalence of women in the overall number of SII beneficiaries and holders suggests an unmistakable disposition toward a feminization of social policies when it comes to combating poverty, a circumstance pointed out by quite a few authors (Aguirre, 1998; Molyneux, 2006; Meyer, Klein and Fernandes, 2012). According to their conclusions, the devices and general focus of the policies tend to reinforce women's responsibility over their family, especially when it comes to their dependent children and elders. This trend complies with the very same hegemonic socio-cultural representations of gendered roles (Vasconcelos, 2002), accountable for "naturalizing" women as caretakers and protectors of the domestic sphere. Not far from the familialist ideological viewpoint (Pimentel and Albuquerque, 2010), some public policies indeed promote and legitimize women, particularly if they are mothers, as crucial agents of social risk prevention and the primary agent of family well being. Men are not involved in the process in the same manner, nor does the system provide any strategy to ensure a more egalitarian sharing of duties and

responsibilities between males and females applying for SII benefits. On such premises, the State can be found to contribute to the maintenance of the hegemonic traits that sustain gender inequality.

That situation produces paradoxical outcomes, as Molyneux (2006) observed in the case of the Mexican CCT program *Progresa/Oportunidades* (Progress/Opportunities). Thus, as the author claims, "even as women might be marginally 'empowered' within these structures (through managing the subsidy), such programmes in effect reinforce the social divisions through which gender asymmetries are reproduced" (idem, p. 438). Something similar occurs with the Portuguese SII. Its importance as a means of income transfer to women and families enduring severe economic needs is undeniable. Cash transfers under the SII program, more than affording access to goods and services, grant women with higher capacity for personal agency, which may turn into better levels of citizen participation. Having said this, it is not our intention to question the SII's role in the alleviation of poverty and in fighting social exclusion as well as a panoply of social risks. However, and this is the point we would like to emphasize, social policy devices such as the SII present some collateral perverse effects. Let us take a look at some of them.

Firstly, it is worth mentioning the consequences of the strict vigilance and tight bureaucratic control imposed upon SII holders. Such control is in part induced by a pattern of stigma interwoven with concepts of poverty and, at the same time, rigid technical control of SII beneficiaries promotes this very same stigmatized image. We should not forget the fact that, becoming a SII beneficiary is collectively understood as a sign of poverty. Since women happen to be the most visible nexus of this policy's execution, they are the ones who suffer the most from the inherent stigma.

Another adverse effect, possibly more obviously negative, though more surreptitious, comes from the State's propensity to hold women responsible as family caretakers regarding the particular life conditions of the moment. A circumstance noted by one of the women studied, whose statement emphasizes the State's disregard towards her physical constraints and health condition: "I even had to go to my daughter's school meetings with a swollen belly, right after having gone through surgery, otherwise they would turn down my SII subsidy. […] Even so, I've never failed to attend a single school meeting" (SII beneficiary, 50 years old). In practical terms, the SII device operates within the above-mentioned old gender asymmetries, reinforcing traditional gender identities and the associated duties. A paradox often theorized as a clearly divided set of female obligations as opposed to male privileges (Molyneux, 2006; Mariano and Carloto, 2011).

In addition, the inclusion contract that women are required to sign up to implies as a mandatory condition the attendance of professional training and qualification. Within the context of an active job search plan, such a clause is explained as a necessary requirement to successfully attain labor inclusion. Nonetheless, the recipients of the SII affected by these obligations frequently need to commute to urban centers where the training courses take place. In certain contexts, they are required to travel long distances without the availability of an efficient public transportation network. For instance, attending two hours of professional training in the city of Vila Real implied that the beneficiaries residing 40 kilometers away would have to dedicate a full day's journey, as one woman explained to us. A loss of time and money was how she viewed the mandatory attendance of professional training, topped by the sense that it was not helping her to get a job. In fact, after more than a decade benefiting from the SII, this woman found a steady job, according to her, through her own social network. Having taken more than eight professional courses, she recognized that they did not have any influence in her labor inclusion.

As a result of the above, the SII intensifies the already heavy encumbrances that fall on women and contributes to maintaining the ideological premises that curtail female emancipation. So, it makes no sense the conservative vision of poverty made by Murray (in Ypeij, 2009: 38) as a result of a welfare State in which it would be more advantageous for low-skilled and low social strata women remain unmarried, have their children and seek social support instead to found a family and to get a job. The life trajectories and discourse of the women we interviewed do not point to any particular advantage or concrete benefit from matrifocality. Neither do they acknowledge any clear advantage of benefiting from the SII in detriment of acceding to the labor market.

4. Final remarks

The enduring androcentric views and the associated gender asymmetries continue to encircle many women in a core of traditional obligations, especially in the field of parental care and domestic management. These obligations often accumulate with the responsibilities that stem from their entry into the labor market, hence curtailing their real emancipation. Though intended to be exploratory, the discussion developed throughout these pages attempted to show how the amassing of productive and reproductive tasks becomes particularly burdensome to matrifocal family structures. Not that matrifocality has to mean greater poverty, as it is often presented, but because it represents an

increase in women's responsibilities and daily challenges that force them to take on their hands a more active role as the household's economic, educational and emotional providers.

Such overburdening of responsibilities on women frequently engenders situations of material vulnerability that requires them to resort to social protection devices, as the case of the SII well illustrates. Paradoxically, policies that should aim to relieve economic constraints – something that, in fact, happens – also tend to produce collateral and perverse effects. Like many other CCT measures all over the world, the SII, in part, generates additional burdens on women. The insertion contracts serve as a good example of such, since they require women to comply with a range of bureaucratic and mandatory conditions that reinforce values and practices that configure gender inequality. At the same time, it requires them to make a serious commitment toward their economic empowerment through vocational training and active employment search attitudes. Furthermore, the SII is a protection mechanism subject to considerable socio-ideological contestation since it is prone to enforce stereotypes and stigmas upon those who apply and benefit from social programs.

It would be interesting, in future investigations, to deepen the understanding of the cognitive coordinates that underpin social protection policy and its devices, such as the SII, and assess to what extent many of its consequences may constitute an obstacle to an effective democratic gender participation and a more just share of responsibilities between men and women. This would constitute a fundamental condition for minimizing many of the manifestations of poverty affecting, predominantly and with particular severity, women.

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